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ABSTRACT

A "naturalistic" study of eight college students enrolled in a freshman writing class was conducted to determine what variables are critical to the learning process. After observing and tape recording four individual conferences with each of the students, the recorded transcripts were analyzed to determine the one or two main concerns that students expressed about their writing. The nature of the concerns, as well as the needs of the students, changed from the first to the last conferences. Teachers need to be aware of how much influence they have on students' verbalizing their concerns about their writing and how much these concerns govern what the students do when they compose and the decisions they make while writing, both about how to proceed and how to revise. (AEA)

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TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE WRITING CONFERENCE

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Last year I began a naturalistic study of eight college freshmen who were enrolled in the freshman writing class of one of our finest teachers at San Francisco State. I was actually very ambitious when I think back about my original aims for this study. I wanted to know whether or not students were learning anything, and if they were, I wanted to know what variables seemed to be critical in the learning process. The idea of giving pre and post test essays did not seem to be the procedure that could yield the kind of qualitative information I wanted, for I wanted to know more than whether or not students improved; I wanted to know how they improved, if they did.

My first major research problem was how to observe students learning. I actually wanted to see the learning in the process of occurring. Students probably learn in many places, some of them closed to the investigator, like the student's private place of study, and some of them not very good places to view individuals in the process of learning, like the classroom. Indeed, one impressionable youngster, after coming home from school his first day, proclaimed that he was never going back. "What's the use of school," he said. "I can't read and I can't write and the teacher won't even let me talk." The one place that is both open to the investigator and a good place to observe students learning is the individual writing conference with a teacher about a paper. Since students and teachers can converse freely during the conference, and

since it is a place where teaching and learning should occur, I thought it could be a productive place to observe individuals learning. However, for one to observe learning in the conference, the conference must be carefully designed so that the student has the unrestrained opportunity to volunteer what she or he does and does not know, to voice his or her concerns about writing. The teacher in this study used specific techniques to open up the conference to student talk. For example, the students were invited to talk about their past experiences in writing courses, their writing process for every paper and their specific feelings about the strengths and weaknesses of the paper under discussion, before the teacher offered any comments or instruction. Such intervention, in the interest of research, I believe, is pedagogically sound too, for Ellen Nold in a discussion of the well-structured conference warns against too much teacher talk. In the end, with this intervention, I found that these conferences seemed to yield information about learning.

My second major research problem was how to begin analyzing the transcripts of student-teacher conferences so as to be able to specify the learning process in a replicable way. For the research, I taped four conferences during the semester for each of eight students in the study. The conferences were a natural part of the course of instruction. As I listened over and over to the tapes of the conferences and as I examined different schemes of protocol and discourse analysis, I tried to figure out how best to analyze the learning process, how to

identify specific markers of learning. I gave up Mozart symphonies on my car's tape deck in favor of the less dulcet tones of student-teacher talk. I drove my family to distraction with the constant invasion of non-musical tapes.

I studied how Flower and Hayes analyzed their protocols of the writing process, but my protocols were different from theirs in several important ways. First, their students were engaged in monologues, verbalizing their usually silent thinking process; my students were engaged in natural dialogues with their teachers. In these dialogues, the students show some but not all parts of their learning process, and since their dialogue is not explicitly focused on how they learn, in my analysis I would have to develop a way to make inferences about their learning states and stages. Besides developing a way to make reliable and valid inferences, I also had to account in some way for the influence of the teacher's talk on the student's talk; I could not take every student utterance in isolation, for what the student says in such a setting is necessarily influenced by what the teacher says. So for my analysis I decided to employ some techniques from the analysis of discourse in linguistics so that I could examine both the student and the teacher and their interactive effects on one another.

In another study of protocols of student teacher conferences, Collins, Warnock and Passafiume examined tutors teaching students about South American geography. Collins and his colleagues studied these conference protocols for the purpose of writing computer tutoring programs, so their focus was on studying what

the teacher did in the tutoring situation. They decided to select and analyze top level aspects of the dialogue, main types of teaching segments, in order to learn about the essential properties of good tutoring strategies. In spite of the differences in focus and purpose between my study and theirs, I too wanted first to identify top level aspects of the dialogue which I would then examine in more detail linguistically.

As I listened over and over to several of my conference tapes and poured over the transcripts, I looked for the top level aspects of the dialogue related to student learning. What seemed most salient to me was that in a given conference students usually seemed to have one or two main top level concerns about their writing that they repeated over and over again and that concern or those concerns seemed to change as the semester progressed. Also, it seemed that the teacher was using specific strategies to enable the student to express the concerns initially and that as the semester progressed, the student concerns changed in response to what the teacher did.

Interestingly, micro analyses of the discourse between psychiatrists and their patients have revealed a similar phenomenon. Patients repeat over and over again their main concern when talking to their psychiatrist. In the book The First Five Minutes, an entire volume on five minutes of dialogue between a patient and a pyschiatrist, Pittenger and his colleagues found "a patient in a psychiatric interview will tell the therapist repeatedly what his troubles are... the very fact of recurrence--except of those patterns shaped by everybody in the culture--renders a pattern diagnostically significant"

(p. 235). And Labov and Fanschel, in their book, Therapeutic Discourse: Psychotherapy as Conversation, a book on fifteen minutes of psychiatrist-patient talk, found recurrent themes too, which they labeled propositions and defined as "those general statements which are said to recur implicitly or explicitly in many parts of the session. These propositions provide the firm skeleton for the surface that confronts us" (p.356).

It seems particularly interesting to me that students in a writing conference repeat their concerns about writing to their teacher in much the same way that the patient repeats his or her personal concerns to the psychiatrist. Just as patients have very serious concerns, ones that matter so much that they repeat them over and over again to their psychiatrist, so that they are certain they will be heard; so do students have very serious concerns about their writing, ones that matter so much that they repeat them over and over to their teacher. Both the patient and the student want help with their problems.

My first step in my formal data analysis was to analyze four conference transcripts, the first of the semester and the last of the semester for one of the weaker and one of the stronger students in the class. I first located every occurrence of every possible student initiated (that is not teacher prompted) concern. Next, I calculated the frequency of occurrence of each concern within each conference. The concept of student concern proved powerful. In a talk this past December at the Modern Language Association, I reported that in each of these four conferences each student focused about 75% of his or her

total concern on one or two issues. Other concerns were mentioned only once or twice and received generally well under 10% of the student's focus. And the nature of the concerns, as well as the needs of the students, changed from the first to the last conference.

Jay, the stronger of the two students I studied, was concerned in his first conference with his blocked composing process. He had a great deal of difficulty getting started, getting ideas that he felt satisfied with. And unless he could get good enough ideas, ideas that according to his judgment were neither "vague" nor "redundant," he would not even hand in his work. In his first conference I found 76% of his mention of concern to focus on this network of categories having to do with his problems of getting started, problems which stemmed from his high standards for his work. He mentioned five other concerns, all of them unrelated to this concern and unrelated to each other. Each took up from 4 to 8% of his focus on concern.

In her first conference, Cee, the less verbally apt student, mentioned ten concerns, with 49% of the mention focusing on grammar and sentence errors, a concern quite unlike Jay's and one Shaughnessy showed typical of basic writers. Cee also exhibited a second substantial concern, her general distrust of teachers, focusing 21% of her mentions here. Her other eight concerns got from 3 to 9% of her attention.

In the final conference of the semester the concerns of both students were different from what they were in the beginning. Jay never mentioned problems getting started. He focused most of

his energy (73%) on discussions of the development of his ideas. Indeed, weak development in the product is a symptom of problems getting started and getting ideas during the process. So Jay could have just changed his way of talking about his problem. But Jay's concern was not with weak development; rather, in this last conference, he mentioned over and over how much he worked on development in this essay and how satisfied he was with his development. It appeared that during the course of the semester he had learned how to overcome his main problem of getting started and getting good enough ideas.

In her final conference, Cee, too, focused on development, with 65% of her concern placed here, but the substance of her concern with development was very unlike Jay's. She was dissatisfied with how her developed ideas and her thesis fit together. She was also still slightly concerned with her grammar and sentence structure, with 15% of her concern being placed here, but the focus on this concern had decreased drastically from her first conference.

Since I reported those findings at MLA, I have had the opportunity to analyze the first and last conference for one of the other students in the class, CH. CH, interestingly, showed no serious concern in her first conference; a few times she mentioned problems getting started and settling on a topic and a few times she mentioned her insecurities about her grammatical correctness and her child-like syntax, but in general her talk was sparse in the first conference. Although she voiced concerns, she rarely directed the dialogue. And it was difficult

to determine from just the first conference how seriously she took her concerns, for they did not seem so overriding as the concerns of the other students. By the last conference, CH was quite concerned with two issues: proper ways of combining sentences to alleviate what she had vaguely referred to earlier as child-like syntax and discourse level mechanical issues, such as the importance of the consistency of a particular plural form throughout the paper. So CH's concerns in the last conference indicated that perhaps she was trying to express related concerns in the first conference, at least about her syntax, but for some reason she could not express her concerns clearly or repetitively.

CH's first conference prompted me to look more closely at the following questions: how do students voice their concerns? what, if anything, within the dialogue allows them to or not to voice those concerns clearly and repetitively? On your handout you will see the very first attempt of these three students to voice their initial main concern in their first conference, and you will see the teacher's response to the students' attempts. Jo Keroes, who is working with me on parts of this project, in her analysis of another segment of this conference data, found that speech act theory provides a particularly insightful way to analyze parts of the discourse between student and teacher, to determine what the student is trying to do or get the hearer/teacher to do. Notice that in all cases the students issued their concern in the form of a statement meeting the speech act conditions of a request to the teacher to talk about the concern.

But in all cases the request was a very indirect one. The requests fall into the category of what Searle and other speech act theorists have labeled indirect speech acts. The student does not directly request anything of the teacher; rather the student, on the surface, is answering a question posed by the teacher about past writing instruction. But an indirect request is embedded in the responses. In Jay's case, the teacher asks, "What did you learn in that class?" He picks up on her cue about thesis statements and begins to parrot every technical writing teacher type term he can remember: "topic sentences," "supporting," but he can't remember what goes with supporting, so after a stutter he comes up with "transition words" and then a new term for me, "echoes." Then Jay issues his request. He says what's really on his mind about the last class in a very fluent burst, "we had to do a paper but I didn't do it so I didn't do very good in that class." Jay wants the teacher to know that he has a problem; he requests the opportunity to talk further about the problem and eventually he is requesting her help with it.

The teacher is not expecting Jay's uncanned answer, and in almost a speech habit she echoes his last words, not yet having fully comprehended what he has said: "You didn't do the paper, yeah." Now she is ready to go on to another topic, to let this crucial revelation drop as she switches to "what other kind of things did you do?" But then as she processes what Jay actually just said, she interrupts herself in the middle of her question which would have changed the subject to

ask, "how come you didn't do the paper?" She now has responded to Jay's request for an opportunity to talk further. And now Jay answers with a long fluent stretch of talk during which time he elaborates on his main concern about his writing process and again indirectly requests help with his problem. So here the teacher almost missed Jay's crucial request, but she did not.

Now let us look at Cee's case. She has taken English 106, the current writing course, once before and failed it. The teacher is now going over a questionnaire in which Cee had revealed this information. The teacher acknowledges that she has read that Cee has taken the course before. Cee seems anxious to talk about and is completely unembarrassed by her earlier failure. She freely gives the text dates of the class and the way it was structured--"three weeks, three hours each day." The teacher in her next remark shows that she is basically uncomfortable talking to the student about her past failure. This is the first meeting between student and teacher, and the teacher does not know how the student feels about having failed the course and about having to take it over. The teacher shows her discomfort with her many hesitations and false starts. She utters seven words that are transitions in the discourse before she makes her substantive comment, "it's the same course that you're taking here." Again notice the large number of transitional place holders, "okay, good, good. All right, so then," before the teacher makes the statement "obviously a lot of the stuff you're listening to in our class will be just a review." Both the number of transitional words and the fact

that the teacher is not acknowledging the reality of the failure or its probable importance to Cee show the teacher's discomfort. It is nonsense that the student is in for a review. Cee and the teacher know that if Cee failed there is a lot that Cee never learned. The teacher is making up excuses for the student. The student's reply shows that she does not want the excuses, that the teacher is being unnecessarily polite. Cee contradicts the teacher's assessment of the situation with the conjunction "but" that indicates contrast with what was said before. Cee goes on to say, "It will help me a lot more because I did have trouble in some areas which you are going over right now which I am understanding much more better." And here Cee requests that the teacher attend to her past failure and give her help in those troublesome areas. Now that the teacher has gotten the student to bring up the true facts of what it means to have failed, she is relieved and says, "Oh good, okay, good." The teacher now can pick up on the student's request to talk about the failure honestly and ask, "Like what kind of areas so far? Can you think of anything specific?" And then the student is off onto her main concern about errors in syntax. Again notice how the student makes her request of the teacher in a vague way, "I did have trouble in some areas" and the teacher must probe to find out specifically what the student's concern is, what those areas are.

Now let us turn to the case of CH who voices no recognizable concern. CH and the teacher are talking about CH's past writing courses as they go over CH's responses on her questionnaire.

The teacher makes the statement, based on CH's response on the questionnaire, that CH has a good sense of how to write a paper. CH responds again, like Cee, with a conjunction indicating contrast, "but." She implies--no teacher, your assessment is not exactly right, "I'm really, I'm pretty weak in English." The teacher this time is not anticipating the cue as she was with Cee, and here she does not pick it up. Instead of probing to find out what CH means, what the request is, the teacher changes the topic. The teacher sees that BCA or broadcasting is CH's major and then asks her about another creative writing class. Several times CH tries to voice her concerns, but each time the teacher denies her the opportunity to elaborate.

So far I have several conclusions about main concerns which I hope to test further. First, in a psychiatric interview the dialogue is supposed to center around the patient's problems or concerns about life in general; in the writing conference the dialogue is supposed to center around a teacher's and thus a student's concerns about the writing. Second, it is particularly striking how much influence the teacher has on the student. These concerns about writing seem to have their source in past and present writing instruction. Every initial concern is voiced when the teacher and student are discussing past writing instruction. The concerns that grow out of instructional experiences become so important to the students that they voice them over and over just as the psychiatric patient does. Third, because of the importance of the concerns,

I hypothesize that they govern a lot of what the student does when he or she composes, many of the decisions the student makes while writing, both about how to proceed and how to revise. As I continue to analyze the discourse in these conference tapes, I will look at the specifics of the student's changing strategies and knowledge and how in the teaching learning process the teacher interacts with the student to effect those changes.

JAY

T: And how about, what did you learn in that class? Like what kind of things specifically have you studied? Did you study things like thesis statements...

J: Yeah, topic sentences and uh, supporting and the tra-transition words and echoes /Good./ and we had to do a paper but I didn't do it so I didn't do very good in that class.

T: You didn't do the paper, yeah. Um, what other kind of things did you do? Did you--how come you didn't do the paper? Is it just like it came at the wrong time of year?

J: Well, we had to pick a topic on our own and just, you know, write a whole paper on it, and I just didn't want to. I didn't even... The teacher said if we had to do a paper for another class we could just, you know, do that for that class too, and turn that in. I didn't have any papers that were good or I don't like to write on the topic that I just picked so I didn't do it.

CEE

T: I see that you took a 106 in the Winter Session. /Right./ Okay, that was just this last January.

C: It was from January 2 to January 19, you know. It was a three week course, three hours a day.

T: I see, um, so the thing, okay it's the same course that you're taking here. Uh, you're learning how to write a topic sentence, and develop a topic. Okay, good, good. All right, so then obviously a lot of the stuff you're listening to in our class will be just a review.

C: Uh hum, yeah. But it will help me a lot more because I did have trouble in some areas which you are going over right now which I am understanding much more better.

T: Oh, good, okay, good. Like what kind of areas so far? Can you think of anything specific?

C: Well, like when we were on fragments and clauses and phrases--those areas which help me.

CH

T: But you um feel that you learned some specific things. In other words, if you looked at your writing, you would have a sense of what kinds of things you need to do to produce a /Mmmm/ fairly good expository essay.

CH: A little bit. But I'm really, I'm pretty weak in English.

T: Okay, Oh what is, Oh BCA, broadcasting, yeah, that's your major. How about in the creative writing class. Did you pick up any good techniques of writing in there?

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